

STATEMENT OF PAUL HOFFMAN, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY, FISH AND WILDLIFE AND PARKS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS OF THE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES, CONCERNING S. 1672, TO EXPAND THE TIMUCUAN ECOLOGICAL AND HISTORIC PRESERVE, FLORIDA, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.

MAY 20, 2004

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the Department's views on S. 1672, a bill to expand the Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve in Florida.

The Department supports S. 1672. The bill would authorize the National Park Service (NPS) to expand the preserve boundary to include American Beach, a unique historic recreational area established in the 1920s for African-Americans during the segregated "Jim Crow" era. The 12.5 acre boundary expansion, including the existing structures and beachfront, will not result in additional operational costs to the NPS because the area would be managed with existing staff.

S. 1672 authorizes a boundary expansion for the Timucuan Preserve to encompass 12.5 acres of the remaining American Beach area. The 12.5-acre area is significant because it includes important remnants of the beach, natural dune, and remaining historic structures associated with the prominent era of American Beach resort use. Consistent with many other areas within the boundary of the Timucuan Preserve, the NPS would cooperate with other agencies and private landowners in managing land within its boundary.

Inclusion of American Beach will facilitate preservation and understanding of this important site. Within the 12.5-acre expansion area, the NPS anticipates receiving 8.5 acres by donation from the Amelia Island Plantation. The remaining four acres are in private ownership and are currently for sale. Although within the boundary expansion area, NPS has no plans to purchase these four acres. Like other areas of the Timucuan Preserve that are outside of NPS ownership, the NPS would work cooperatively with appropriate agencies and interested private landowners to help to manage and interpret American Beach resources. Nassau County officials and private citizens support expansion of the park boundary and donation of American Beach land to the NPS.

Abraham Lincoln Lewis, co-founder and president of the Afro-American Life Insurance Company, founded American Beach in 1920 as a place where executives and employees of the company could enjoy ocean beach recreational activities in the “Jim Crow” era when such opportunities were severely limited. However, word soon spread and African-Americans from Atlanta, Tuskegee, and other parts of the south came to the beach town to buy property and spend their summers free from reminders of segregation and discrimination. The resort also had low rates that allowed the less affluent accessibility for day gatherings. The African-American working class came to the resort from farming towns across South Georgia, North Florida, and Alabama.

In the 1940s and 1950s American Beach became the place where African-Americans went for recreation and relaxation without seeing a “Whites Only” sign, the rule for beaches in the southeast at that time. Many writers, artists, and entertainment and sports

celebrities enjoyed the town's special vacationland atmosphere. At American Beach, entertainers like Ray Charles and Duke Ellington played in the local clubs.

The Amelia Island Plantation, a private corporation on Amelia Island, intends to donate 8.5 acres of the 12.5-acre expansion area to the NPS. The proposed donation would ensure that the legacy of conservation on behalf of Abraham Lincoln Lewis and the Afro-American Life Insurance Company is preserved. The 8.5-acre donation consists of a natural sand dune that is currently open to visitor use through a conservation easement, and associated scrub and maritime hammock habitat. The dune and surrounding habitat were protected from development in the original designs for American Beach. The Amelia Island Plantation Corporation later preserved the site intact when it purchased the property. Natural habitat values of the site include high species diversity with relatively little disturbance and few exotic species, and habitat for the threatened loggerhead turtle.

The proposed expansion area also includes important remaining structures from the "Jim Crow" era, including the cotillion area where people gathered to be entertained by celebrities. One home (Ervin's Rest) was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1998. In 2002 the American Beach Historic District was listed on the National Register in recognition of its African-American cultural heritage. The NPS, other agencies, and private landowners will cooperatively manage structures that remain within the boundary expansion area.

Created by segregation and abandoned after integration, American Beach has struggled against a powerful tide. Development of large condominium and resort complexes on Amelia Island has encroached on the remnants of this African-American resort community. As a result, American Beach has decreased in acreage from its most prosperous size of 200+ acres to only 60 acres that remain today. Inclusion of the proposed 12.5 acres within the Timucuan Preserve will help preserve critical components of American Beach and its unique association with African-American heritage.

The General Management Plan for the Timucuan Preserve outlines a partnership approach to management. Should the preserve boundary be expanded, management of American Beach would follow this partnership model. In particular, the NPS would work closely with County, State, federal, and private interests on lands owned by the NPS and in other sites outside of NPS ownership but within the preserve boundary. Through these partnerships, the NPS would work cooperatively to pursue restoration and protection of remaining historic and natural resources at American Beach.

The proposed boundary expansion enjoys support from private landowners and local officials. Throughout Nassau and Duval Counties, Florida individuals and groups have demonstrated support for the protection and conservation of American Beach. American Beach has also been the subject of documentaries on the History Channel. As a result, high public interest in saving this resource has been generated.

Mr. Chairman, this completes my testimony. I will be happy to answer any questions that you or any members of the Subcommittee may have now.